

INTRODUCTION

9040.1

(No. 7 September, 1991)

Due to California's vegetation, topography, climate, and population, we experience one of the most severe wildfire problems in the world. Between 1923 and 1990, over 5,400 homes and other structures were destroyed by wildfire, over 3600 of those since 1970. More than 135 Californians have lost their lives due to wildfires since 1923. Creating a fire safe California is not the responsibility of one person, or one agency, but the collective responsibility of all California residents and all levels of government.

THE PROBLEM

9040.2

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The continuing increase in numbers of homes and other structures in the wildlands of California creates a growing threat to life and property from wildfires. The adoption of statewide minimum Fire Safe standards will result in a regulated encroachment of development into State Responsibility Areas (SRA). Individual homes and developments need to be designed to provide reasonable safety for the structure and its occupants and firefighters in the face of a wildfire.

While the legislature has vested the state with the responsibility and authority to provide wildland fire protection, local government has been granted the authority to approve and permit development and construction. This has led to a conflict between overlapping responsibilities and authorities. This division of authority has historically given local government the ability to approve development and construction with minimal consideration of wildland fire protection needs and placed the state in a role that is predominately advisory.

The lack of statewide minimum Fire Safe standards has been an issue since the early 1960s. In 1965 the County Supervisors Association of California (CSAC) authored and published The Fire Safety Guides for California Watersheds. Since then, eight additional reports and studies have pointed out the need for Fire Safe standards and have encouraged California to adopt statewide Fire Safe standards. In 1980, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection published the Fire Safe Guides for Residential Development in California, which is endorsed by CSAC, and which provides preferred fire safety standards for construction and development in SRA.

BOARD OF FORESTRY POLICIES

9040.3

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Historically, the Board of Forestry has urged the cities and counties of California to incorporate Fire Safe standards and fire protection planning measures in the placement of any development in forest, watershed and rangelands designated as State Responsibility Area. The Board also encourages the adoption of the Fire Safe Guides for Residential Development in California as part of each county General Plan Safety Element.

In 1989, SB 186 (Chapter 778), authored by Senator Ralph Dills, required counties to submit to the Board of Forestry for review, wildland fire protection policies and any proposed updates of their safety element. The Board must return to the county any comments and recommendations within 60 days. If the county rejects the Board's comments, the county must notify the Board of the reasons for rejection. During their review of these documents, the Board may request, through channels, unit review and comments on the proposals. Each administrative unit shall support this need based upon available resources.

With the passage of SB 1075 (Chapter 955), authored by Senator Don Rogers in 1987, the Board has taken an increasingly stronger stand on the issue of prudent fire safe development. This legislation directed the Board to prepare minimum development and construction standards for wildland fire protection, specifically relating to access, water supplies, street signing, building addresses and fuel modification. These comprehensive regulations became effective on May 30, 1991.

Each county containing SRA is required to implement and enforce PRC 4290 or request the Board of Forestry to certify their local rules and ordinances as meeting the same practical effect as the PRC 4290 regulations. The Board has directed the Department to implement the approved regulations and to review and comment on development in SRA.

PROGRAM INTENT

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The intent of the Fire Safe program is to minimize the loss of structures, lives, and resources due to uncontrolled wildfires. The Fire Safe program combines the philosophy of self-protection with the concept of defensible space. Self-protection places some of the burden of fire protection on the homeowner, builder and/ or developer, by incorporating basic fire protection measures into the home or development as it is built. The concept of defensible space provides a reasonably safe location from which firefighters can protect a structure with a greater potential of saving the structure. Each home, subdivision, and development in SRA should have built into its design adequate emergency equipment access, building and street identification, and a reasonable water supply for fire suppression needs. Every homeowner, developer, and local government planner should understand the importance of planning for fire protection, the need to clear flammable vegetation around structures (PRC 4291), and the benefits of greenbelts and fuelbreaks in and around subdivisions and developments.

DEPARTMENT AUTHORITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

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The Board of Forestry has delegated to the Department the responsibility to implement PRC 4290. Units shall review appropriate permits and tentative maps for development and construction in SRA for appropriate wildland fire protection mitigation and shall make recommendations to local jurisdictions relative to the Forest and Fire Laws and requirements contained in Title 14, Division 1.5, Chapter 7, Subchapter 2, Articles 1-5. Each unit shall also review project environmental documentation provided via the State Clearing House or the local jurisdiction for conformance with CGC 1270-1279, the Forest and Fire Laws and other CDF program interests.

PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

9040.6

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- Develop uniform statewide minimum standards for wildland fire protection.
- Reduce loss and damage to structures and resources.
- Create a safer environment for occupants living in the wildlands who are at risk from wildfires.
- Require self-protection, with less dependence upon the state and local fire agencies.
- Provide defensible space for firefighters, reducing firefighter risk.
- Reduce the vulnerability of homes and developments to wildfire.
- Support CDF's resource protection mission.

Each Unit shall address the local implementation of PRC 4290, including these objectives, in their Unit Fire Prevention Plan.

COMPLEMENTING PROGRAMS

9040.7

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Fire Safe standards, on their own, will not solve California's conflict between development and wildfire. Catastrophic weather conditions, the buildup of fuels, and the increasing risk from wildland users will continue to plague California fire agencies. **An integrated approach, using education and engineering programs and activities as identified in the Unit Fire Prevention Plan shall be utilized for both discretionary and ministerial activities.** The application of complementing regulations, standards, and requirements (such as PRC 4291), clearance of flammable vegetation (vegetation management to eliminate disastrous fuel buildups), and Forest and Fire Laws (including industrial and utility requirements and fire safe measures to provide built-in fire protection) will reduce the problem to an acceptable level of risk.

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